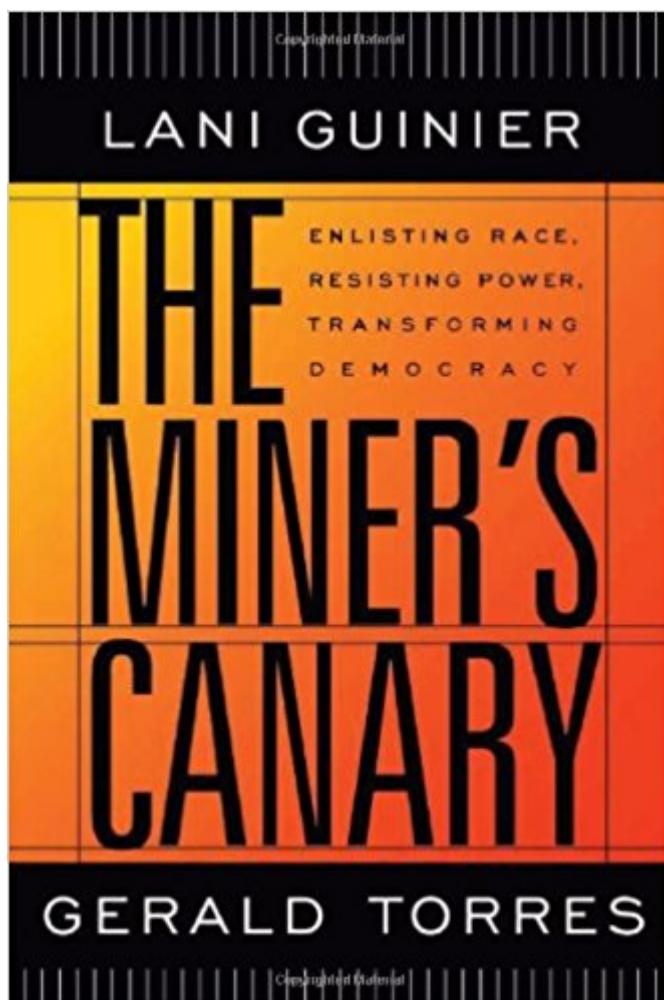


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# The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy (The Nathan I. Huggins Lectures)



## Synopsis

Like the canaries that alerted miners to a poisonous atmosphere, issues of race point to underlying problems in society that ultimately affect everyone, not just minorities. Addressing these issues is essential. Ignoring racial differences--race blindness--has failed. Focusing on individual achievement has diverted us from tackling pervasive inequalities. Now, in a powerful and challenging book, Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres propose a radical new way to confront race in the twenty-first century. Given the complex relationship between race and power in America, engaging race means engaging standard winner-take-all hierarchies of power as well. Terming their concept "political race," Guinier and Torres call for the building of grass-roots, cross-racial coalitions to remake those structures of power by fostering public participation in politics and reforming the process of democracy. Their illuminating and moving stories of political race in action include the coalition of Hispanic and black leaders who devised the Texas Ten Percent Plan to establish equitable state college admissions criteria, and the struggle of black workers in North Carolina for fair working conditions that drew on the strength and won the support of the entire local community. The aim of political race is not merely to remedy racial injustices, but to create truly participatory democracy, where people of all races feel empowered to effect changes that will improve conditions for everyone. In a book that is ultimately not only aspirational but inspirational, Guinier and Torres envision a social justice movement that could transform the nature of democracy in America.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"To my friends, I look like a black boy. To white people I don't know, I look like a wanna-be punk. To the cops I look like a criminal," explains Lani Guinier's 14-year-old biracial son. Mixing myriad personal examples with hard data and analysis of biased news reports, Guinier and Torres cogently and forcefully argue that "color-blind" solutions are not "attaining racial justice and ensuring a healthy democratic process." Arguing for a multifaceted conception of "biological race, political race, historical race, cultural race," their purpose here is to find terms for discussing "the lived experience of race in America" and for moving toward a society that values (rather than just tolerates) difference. Moving through a wealth of complicated, intellectual and often abstract material, Guinier and Torres pick out the concrete and useful bits: Michel Foucault's explications of power as an ideology are explained via a contentious and racially divided union drive at K mart; the old joke about the rabbi and the bishop of Verona is used to illustrate the long-fought-over issue of race-conscious redistricting an issue that got Guinier labeled "the quota queen" in 1993 via her book *The Tyranny of the Majority*. Guinier, a professor at Harvard Law School, and Torres, professor at the University of Texas Law School, also grapple intelligently and with passionate wit with such explosive topics as racial profiling and the elusiveness of racial identification and identity (i.e., "white Hispanics"), making this one of the most provocative and challenging books on race produced in years. (Feb. 8) Forecast: While the tone and argumentation here are firmly academic compared with Guinier's other titles, this book will be widely reviewed on the basis of her reputation, and will be brandished by pundits. And even Beltway outsiders will remember the controversy when Clinton nominated her to be an assistant attorney general. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Guinier and Torres issue a clarion call for the progressive possibilities of racial politics in the twenty-first century. *The Miner's Canary* convincingly demonstrates the positive role that racial identification has played and can continue to play in expanding, deepening, and enriching American democracy. (Melissa Nobles, Massachusetts Institute of Technology) *The Miner's Canary* is conceptually imaginative and politically inspiring. It is generously inclusive where other accounts of race and power are harshly exclusive. Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres combine sober analysis and models of democratic activism. (Nancy L. Rosenblum, author of *Liberalism and the Moral Life*) Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres sing a powerful song in lyrical, accessible, sophisticated tones: Race

exists, race positively shapes identity, and organizing around race can save our society. To those who want to join their voices to what must become a swelling harmony, here are the first stanzas. For those afraid of the future, here is a hymn of hope. (Ian F. Haney López, author of *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*) Rejecting the unacceptable choice between colorblindness and identity politics, Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres show us how race consciousness can mobilize people across racial categories to confront structural injustice on issues ranging from education to union organizing, from voting rights to prisons. Inspiring, learned, and compellingly written. (Gerald Frug, author of *City Making: Building Communities Without Building Walls*) Compassion permeates this thoughtful analysis. Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres show us how Americans of all races and ethnicities can draw upon African Americans' positive racial identity, which is rooted in solidarity and the ability to see problems that are systemic. Yes, we can advance democracy by all becoming "black," in the sense of building upon our culture's race consciousness. (Nell Irvin Painter, author of *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*) As the stunningly insightful stories in *The Miner's Canary* make clear, the primary racial challenge of the twenty-first century is to convince white people that social ills adversely affecting people of color disadvantage whites as well. Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres argue persuasively that progress can come through cooperative efforts for reform rather than race-related resistance to it. (Derrick A. Bell, author of *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*) In this outstanding, trenchant, and ultimately uplifting book, Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres demonstrate how a racial order still profoundly structures the life chances of all Americans, and convincingly argue that racially based social movements have historically, and can again, promote a truly egalitarian society. *The Miner's Canary* is sure to become required reading for all those who seek to understand the racial divide as well as those who care about the future of the American polity. (Michael C. Dawson, author of *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*) I recommend this book to every thoughtful U.S. citizen. We all need to get a better analytic grip on the phenomenon of "race." We all need to rethink outdated democratic systems. We all need help in organizing human action across lines of division. *The Miner's Canary* shows how the experiences of people of color are a key diagnostic tool, drawing attention to flaws in the existing system and galvanizing practical ways to change it for the better. Guinier and Torres have got it exactly right. (Jane J. Mansbridge, author of *Beyond Adversary Democracy*) *The Miner's Canary* is thoughtful, provocative, and timely. It persuasively develops the idea of "political race," a concept that identifies racial literacy as a new way to think about social change in American society. This book will challenge the very way we think about race, justice, and the political system in America. (Henry Louis Gates, Jr., author of *Colored People: A Memoir*) Legal scholars Guinier and

Torres invite the public to consider, among other indicators, the plight of young black men, long the primary targets of racial profiling on the part of law-enforcement agencies...Those who insist that American courts dispense justice equally get a stern lesson with statistics the authors cite to the contrary, while civil-rights activists will find much to motivate them in the authors' prescriptions, which include grassroots political organizing, consensus building, "enlisting race to resist hierarchy", and other measures. A useful, provocative, wounded critique of the status quo. (Kirkus Reviews 2001-11-15)Mixing myriad personal examples with hard data and analysis of biased news reports, Guinier and Torres cogently and forcefully argue that "color-blinded" solutions are not "attaining racial justice and ensuring a healthy democratic process"...[The authors] grapple intelligently and with passionate wit with such explosive topics as racial profiling and the elusiveness of racial identification and identity...making this one of the most provocative and challenging books on race produced in years. (Publishers Weekly 2001-11-26)Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres consider how blacks' own perceptions of their plight might lead to a new political movement. In *The Miner's Canary*, Guinier and Torres argue that rather than internalize their social dysfunction as being their "own fault," many blacks have developed a critical perspective on "the system." Refusing to accept the mythology of the American Dream--"that those who succeed or fail invariably do so according to their individual merit"--blacks "appreciate the necessity and efficacy of collective political struggle"...Guinier and Torres announce a bold agenda: "to use the experiences of people of color as the basis for fundamental social change that will benefit not only blacks and Hispanics but other disadvantaged social groups." (James Forman Jr. Washington Post 2002-02-03)Deep in the mines, a distressed canary is a warning that there's poison in the air. Professor Lani Guinier...and Gerald Torres...contend that in America, race is like a miner's canary: Injustices experienced by people of color warn of systemic toxins that threaten everyone...In a passionate call for social change and progressive action, Guinier and Torres convincingly argue that a colorblind approach to deeply entrenched problems does not work; it only inhibits democratic engagement and reinforces existing power structures. Citing the Rev Martin Luther King Jr.'s message that freeing black people from injustice will free America itself, Torres and Guinier urge progressives to use racial awareness as an entryway to political activism. (Rob Mitchell Boston Herald 2002-02-05)How can a book that advocates for something as ethereal-sounding as the "magical realism of political race" amount to a powerfully reasoned and concretely grounded call for the proliferation of multiracial coalitions in challenges to inequality and exclusion in American society? Law professors Guinier and Torres have managed to do so in their gracefully written book, which is both an analysis of the distinctive contours of the post-Civil Rights Era's racial fault lines and a manifesto for a politics that is decidedly

color conscious. Indeed, the purpose of the book is to challenge not simply the calls for colorblindedness on the part of conservatives, but more significantly, similar calls on the part of political leftists. (P. Kivisto Choice 2002-10-01)

Because it's the best book about race relations in America since Ellison's masterpiece of fifty years ago. By "race relations" I mean blacks and whites, as Ellison would have meant the words. But The Miner's Canary is about much more, it's about all-minority-cultures and whites in America. And in direct opposition to the color-blind solution the Supreme Court has decided the Constitution requires, the book's authors esteem and celebrate and find strength, including political strength, in our separate cultural identities -- including the separate (non-oppressive) cultural identities of whites. When I put The Miner's Canary down, I wished I had read the Acknowledgments first, then the chapter "by" Torres. This is a difficult book, it has many authors, and the voice I identify as Ms. Guinier's seems sometimes to address junior high school students and other times to address law professors. So the book has many levels of analysis, and it treats its central topic -- political race -- from many angles. These are not shortcomings, but they add up to a very demanding book. The book's real-life examples, however, are all wonderful and all one -- compelling and utterly elucidating. And the long illustration of how Greek democracy in action would look if it followed American districting and apportionment rules is simply surpassing wonderful. Then there's the book's immediacy. The Nobel Prize winning econometrician Robert Fogel has emphasized the roles of technology and religious activism in America's movements for social justice, relegating progressivism to the status of an adjunct to the latter. The Miner's Canary, on the other hand, puts the struggle for social justice squarely within the politics of progressivism. This is not necessarily inconsistent with Fogel (whatever one thinks of the validity of his argument), assuming Fogel's subject is movements in the past before about 1980 when the Big Sleep set in -- which it is -- and assuming The Miner's Canary is describing developments since about 1980, which it is. The book says something new has been happening, and it started being more than unrelated occurrences about twenty five years ago. This new thing Guinier and Torres call political race. The ambition, originality and insights of this book far outweigh its difficulties due to multiple voices and an "un-ironed out" presentation. I give it five stars.

Thus far, The Miner's Canary has met every expectation and more. It is a provocative, challenging, fact-filled tome.

Must read if your interest is understanding systemic racism and how it rears its ugly head in our society.

Excellent discussion of power and its definition in chapter 4

Provided the insight and statistics into the awesome power of race and its impact on all persons trying to reach an understanding about the justice system and its problems in race issues.

These writers are two of the premier civil rights advocates and thinkers in America today. This book grew out of years of debate and discussion about the political possibilities for individual and collective action by black and brown women and men in today's tough environment. Their collection of stories about race in this book alone makes it worthwhile. There are dozens. Multiracial children. The forced choice between being white or black for latino/hispanic americans. Progressive whites trying to struggle with coalitions led by people of color. Alliances between unions and churches stretched over racial barriers. Dizzying combinations of social justice choices. This book made me smile, nod my head, grimace, and even hold my breath. As a white progressive I found it challenging and hopeful and occasionally painful (as I recognized some of my own well-intentioned mistakes). This book is going to be around a long time because it looks at race and politics in new and provocative and hopeful ways. People who are serious about social justice and race ought to pull up a chair, turn on a light, and start reading.

In Miner's Canary, Guinier and Torres chart a new vision for race in America. Instead of the stagnant, stone throwing rhetoric that has crippled the dialogue on race, this book lays out a blueprint on how Americans of all races can start talking to each other and move forward together. Miner's Canary builds on the prevailing idea that race is not about biology but politics. When viewed through the prism of social and economic factors versus the color of an individual's skin or the texture of that person's hair, we begin to see that social and economic injustice is less about race and more about protecting power and privilege. This book is about ways to get Americans of all races talking to each other and working together to protect democracy. I challenge those who would say otherwise to stop the name calling and stone throwing. Read this book, and let's figure out ways we can work together to make America better than any of us ever dreamed it could be.

Racism has been an impediment in living up to our ideals as a democracy. It will continue to be a

sensitive and volatile issue here in America unless we make an effort to eliminate it. The authors have done a formidable job in reframing the problem in a way to help us transcend it, come together and work toward a solution to what W.E.B. DuBois called the problem of the 20th century. It's a difficult book but well worth the effort!

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